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COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

2138 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6216

(202) 225-3951

<http://www.house.gov/judiciary>

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September 30, 2002

The Honorable Colin Powell
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Powell:

We greatly appreciate your availability to participate in the upcoming consultation on the U.S. refugee program with the House Judiciary Committee. Your availability evidences will at the highest levels of our government to carry out our obligations to refugees as provided in the Refugee Act of 1980 and international treaties. As you know, there is strong bipartisan Congressional support for a refugee program that efficiently and effectively adheres to our long tradition of providing refuge to those facing persecution.

We are writing to you before our meeting because we are gravely concerned that our nation's will to maintain leadership in a multilateral system that protects refugees and ultimately builds peace is not matched at the operational level with suitable mechanisms for carrying out that will. As we near the end of the fiscal year, only about 27,000 refugees have been admitted under the 2002 allocation.

While the terrorist attacks of 2001 and the necessity for increase security measures made this an unusual year, we are disappointed and deeply disturbed by this low level of admissions. In fact, not in the history of the refugee program have we admitted so few refugees. Prior to Fiscal Year 2002, our lowest level of admission under the Refugee Act of 1980 was 61,681 people admitted in Fiscal Year 1983, still some 30,000 more refugees than we admitted this year. There certainly is not a shortage of people in need of resettlement worldwide. While we understand that the 70,000 number is not a mandated requirement, it is an allocation that is intended to be the Administration's target. This year, we had the funding to admit another 40,000 refugees, but, due to our shortfall, those refugees must continue to suffer in limbo without a permanent solution.

Unfortunately, the shortfall in actual admissions compared to the admissions ceiling is not an occurrence isolated to this year. The disconnect between our political will and our implementation of refugee protection has resulted in some 140,000 refugee admissions slots being unfilled in the last eleven years.

In an area as important as the U.S. refugee program, shortfalls and lack of capacity to meet the needs of refugees are unacceptable. Each missed admission number represents a missed opportunity for building international solidarity for refugee protection and represents a desperate refugee waiting for a chance at a new life. Whether this refugee is a Sudanese child in a Kenyan refugee camp, an Afghan woman in Pakistan, an Iraqi man in Jordan, or one of the millions of other refugees in need of protection and a durable solution, their lives and futures depend on our nation's ability to admit refugees in need. The availability of resettlement allows countries that border political conflicts to keep their borders open to refugees because they will know that other countries will assume their fair share of responsibilities to refugees.

We and our colleagues in Congress are willing to work with this Administration to reverse the downward trend in refugee admissions over the last ten years. We look forward to hearing your plans for revising this program to ensure that it better meets its FY 2003 and future annual objectives. In particular, we welcome your views on the following:

1. The involvement of senior policy makers in setting aggressive refugee admissions goals and in ensuring that there is operational capacity and accountability in carrying out these goals;
2. Domestic and global infrastructural reforms that are needed to address refugee needs (including staff and resource augmentation; reforms to the current refugee processing priorities to include women-at-risk, children and long-stayers in certain refugee camps; addressing problems of UNHCR processing and assistance and improving cooperation with private and non-profit organizations);
3. Rollover of funding from Fiscal Year 2002 to admit at least 100,000 refugees in Fiscal Year 2003;
4. The estimated per capita cost for the resettlement of refugees in fiscal years 2003 and beyond;
5. The status of new security processing procedures; and
6. The status and problems of refugee admissions from Africa.

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In addition, we draw your attention to the suggestion that the Department of State conceptualize the FY 2003 refugee program as the second of a two- year effort so that opportunities for refuge do not go to waste. We very much hope that the President will incorporate this two-year approach into his Presidential Determination for FY 2003 adding any unused FY 2002 slots to the proposed 70,000.


To ensure that funding is available, resources currently designated for refugee resettlement should be carried over to FY 2003 for this expanded refugee resettlement program. This solution would serve as a concrete recommitment by the Administration to its earlier plan to expand the program in FY 2003, with higher admission ceiling in the future. Congress has already supported your efforts to maintain a responsive refugee program by authorizing additional funding for the Department of State in the "Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002".

This year and next are critical years for the U.S. refugee program. We must continue to establish and implement new processes for identifying refugees of the most diverse backgrounds and in the most diverse locations, while remaining vigilant on security matters. We have high expectations for the Department of State to continue this country's proud tradition of welcoming refugees while ensuring the integrity of the refugee program which Congress intends to continue to support.

We look forward to a continued dialogue with you as you address the important decisions you will need to make regarding problems in the U.S. refugee program .

Sincerely,


John Conyers, Jr.
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary


Sheila Jackson Lee
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Immigration
and Claims

cc: Hon. F. James Sensenbrenner
Hon. Henry Hyde
Hon. Tom Lantos
Hon. Lamar Smith